

The Future of Force in the Region

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With the growing interdependence of economies in East Asia, security relations among nations in this area have been improved to some extent. As nations are focusing on non-traditional source of threats, e.g., trans-border terrorism, Washington's relations with Beijing have been improved (though the US is not geographically a state in the region). Currently, South Korea's trade volume with China has surpassed that with the US. This has also strengthened Seoul's tie with Beijing, and will serve the stability of the Korean Peninsula positively. Another positive case is that both China and the US will participate in late May in an 18-country naval exercise initiated by Singapore and Indonesia, for disposing explosives on the high sea.

Despite the demise of the Cold War and the expanding economic interactions among the economies in East Asia, however, security relations in the region have not been improved dramatically. The tensions of the Korean peninsula remain high and North Korea's nuclear weapons program, as so reported, have concerned all actors in the region. China's rapid economic growth, planned to be re-quadrupled in the coming two decades, and hence the national strength this will translate into, are inevitably to be viewed as a force that will challenge the regional and possibly global balance of power. Coupled with growing push for independence of Taiwan, security relations across the Straits are increasingly intensified. Other factors in the region, such as Japan's revamping of its constitution to allow rights of armed forces and waging a war, and Russia's possibility to build up a brand-new armed force by 2020, are all possible to contribute to the security pattern of East Asia gradually.

As security drivers in East Asia toward 2020, the most prominent of them are likely to include:

- nuclear weapons development in the region;
- China's growing power and its implication;
- Japan's normalcy and ramification.

First and most pressing is the nuclear weapons development in the region. East Asia has already encompassed major nuclear weapons states: US, Russia and China. The region has also witnessed nuclear weapons development of South Korea and Taiwan. Also, it is well known that Japan has the capability to acquire nuclear weapons quickly given a political decision.

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But most pressing is the nuclear weapons development in North Korea. It is understood that the North may have reprocessed all fuel rods of its Yongbyon-based nuclear reactor, providing it some 35 kg of plutonium, equivalent to at least 4 (or 8) atomic bombs assuming each Hiroshima /Nagasaki-level bomb would require 8 (or 4) kg of plutonium. It is also speculated that North Korea may have acquired some uranium enrichment capability.

Currently, a multilateral effort is being made to negotiate with North Korea to trade its abandonment of its weapons program for a number of benefits. Two rounds of “six-party” talks have been held already in Beijing and the third round is to follow likely next month. However, such negotiation is by no means to guarantee the success of the effort. North Korea could relinquish its nuclear weapons program as a result of the talk, or move on to a nuclear arsenal comparable to that of Pakistan.

Thus, North Korea’s nuclear weapons program plays a driver of security situation in East Asia. Depending who is in the White House and how Washington-Pyongyang plays the game of action-reaction, such weapons development could lead to various possibilities:

- North Korea gives up nuclear weapons program;
- The North keeps its weapons program, stimulating proliferation in the area;
- The US eventually accepts it, and restrains its allies to follow suit;
- The US could not tolerate this and launches an attack.

Though North Korea’s nuclear weapons program could drive regional security to various destinations, none of the outcomes would be ideal if the North would not abandon its program: it could be a war between the US and the North, possibly involving US allies and other players in East Asia, or could be a pure proliferation under the most “peaceful” circumstance.

As a security driver in East Asia, basically the regional situation will be clear in about five years: either North Korea commits nuclear disarmament that is inductive to regional stability, or refuses to do so, forcing the US to accept the *fait accompli*, or to launch a counterproliferation offensive. Therefore, the picture in 2020 due to this driver shall be relative clear by the end of this decade.

Even so, there is reason to extrapolate a future of 2020 when North Korea, if it continues to exist, will have removed its nuclear weapons for a number of reasons: all regional actors don’t welcome its going nuclear; its security relations with China provide it with assurance; the US government may have met North’s demand in *quid pro quo* of its nuclear abandonment; grim economic opportunity with external world given a nuclear arsenal.

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The second driver of military development in the region out to 2020 is China's growth. Since 1978, China has dramatically grown economically, with GDP growth *per annum* at over 8% in average. Though its GDP *per capita* is still way behind, China's overall economic strength has reached the level of some G7 members. In terms of purchasing power parity (PPP), China is one of the leading economies in the world already.

Plus its economic target of further quadrupling of output by 2020, China's growth pace will allow it to have an economic share in the world from current 3% to possibly 8-9% in the next twenty years. This will place China in the top leading economies in the world, even without the PPP consideration.

This also indicates that China's defense expenditure will rise from current \$25 billion to \$100, assuming defense budget grows in commensurate with China's economic growth. Such a budget by 2020 is just a quarter of that of the US at this time, but two times as big as that of current Japan.

Such drastic re-shaping of world economic and military landscape indicates a shift of balance of power in China's favor. Other states will subsequently meet the quandary: how to welcome China bidding farewell to poverty while sustaining *status quo* of the world?

Leadership in Beijing has noticed this consequence, and has recently advocating a theory of "peaceful rise". It is argued that China's rise is of its legitimate rights, and is for peaceful purpose. It is explained that both the process and outcome of China's rise shall be peaceful. Such explanations are helpful as they help reduce the apprehensions of other nations, and remind Beijing that even the exercise of legitimate rights may not be always productive.

As many have noted, China is indeed moving toward a revisionist country: a country that preserves *status quo*. On Korean peninsula, China is now the most prominent actor that works on the peaceful resolution of North Korea's nuclear weapons program. And, for the across Taiwan Straits relationship, China has noted anti-independence has been a more imminent priority than national unification. Therefore, tactically China and the US have converged their interests in maintaining the *status quo* there.

China's rise and Taiwan's inclination to independence will be entangled in the years to come. Under no circumstances one would expect mainland China relinquish its claim of demand of unification with Taiwan, while popular support to this is getting thin on the island. A contrast of both advantage, in terms of hard power, and disadvantage, in terms of Taiwan's heart, is growing high on both ends. This complicates the regional security

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equation.

As the US has *Taiwan Relations Act* that obliges America to certain defense responsibility of Taiwan, so far the across Straits balance of power has been maintained. But as Taiwan is transforming further drifting away from the mainland, the chance of war-fighting in this area is increasing. Therefore, China's rise and Taiwan's move toward independence constitute another driver of military development in East Asia.

This driver will play its role of across-Straits arms race, and the unsymmetrical arms race, with sole focus on the Taiwan question, between China and the US. If the Taiwan independence will be controlled at official level, there may be no war occurring before 2020, but the race of military capability and interoperation development will be tense throughout 2020, with Taiwan gradually losing the edge. But should Taiwan declare independence in the next few years, this driver will lose its validity as by that time, the status of Taiwan may take shape as a consequence of its declaration.

One more security driver is Japan's normalcy. From this January Japan's Liberal Democracy Party (LDP) started debate in the party as to revise Japan's Constitution, primarily to revise Article 9 that stipulated that Japan abandons military means for international disputes and possesses no armed forces. This issue was submitted to the Diet in February, officially starting the legal process of the revision. It is noted that currently 72% of Japan's Diet Members support the Constitution's revision.

At the same time, Japan's has sent armed forces to Iraq. From 2004, Japan will build up missile defense system and revise its *Defense Plan Outline* that will replace its defense-orientated posture with a more aggressive overseas-mission emphasizing stance.

Japan's adjustment reflects its strategic view of strengthening security relations with America, and hedge against China as a rising power. Its new emphasis of developing long-range delivery means as well as strategic-striking weaponry indicated Japan's changing security perception in the region. As Japan is co-developing missile defense platform with the US, Japan inevitably will share with the US its military R&D products, breaking Japan's long-held policy of export of weapons.

Undoubtedly, Japan's shift of military doctrine and defense posture will affect China's security perception. China has taken note of Japan's revised security guideline that allows Tokyo to assist the US when the latter is engaged militarily in Japan's "surrounding" waters. China would not assume that Japan would sit idle when the US intervenes militarily in the Taiwan question.

This cross negative security perception between China and Japan plays no constructive

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role in mending Beijing-Tokyo's political trust. One would expect that the two countries would continue to expand their economic and trade relations, but remain cool in dealing with each other on political and military matters, for many years to come. Such a relationship looks unhealthy and is likely to be the reality, for the coming two decades. At least for this reason, the two Asian giants will compete in security quarter with distrust toward 2020.

In sum, security equation of East Asia by 2020 will be largely driven by three factors: North Korea's nuclear weapons development, China's rise and Taiwan's independence, and Japan's military "normalcy". They are interacting and intertwined. Nuclear path of Pyongyang would affect choices of Tokyo, and if Japan goes officially nuclear, its alliance with Washington, and relations with other actors in the region, will be complicated. China's rise will strategically shift the center of world power, and this course could be interrupted by Taiwan's quest for independence. A war between Beijing and Washington for Taipei's sake, at any time by 2020, will be hard to measure and shall be avoided. Eventually, China and Japan need to seek strategic reconciliation for their own benefits and those of the region.

By 2020, the US will be plausibly playing a balancer role in East Asia, though with more factors to complicate the assuredness of its success.